

## Nine Deities Panel in Ancient Cambodia

### ផ្ទាំងចម្លាក់ទេពប្រាំបួនអង្គក្នុងអារ្យធម៌ខ្មែរបុរាណ

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Received 5 November 2018; Accepted 19 August 2019; Published 8 April 2020

The author declares no known conflict of interest.

**Abstract:** The nine deities panel has been found in large numbers and existed with several configurations of deities in ancient Cambodia. The oldest known example dates from the pre-Angkorian period and shows the *navagrahas* (nine celestial bodies) in a standing posture. The iconographic form differs on Angkorian-period panels, with the nine deities on their individual *vāhana* (mount). By reanalysing the iconography of the deities and the typological development of the panels, it is argued that this later group represents the *navadevas*, a term used to designate the combination of four *grahas* and five *dikpālas* (guardians of the directions). This study also considers issues relating to the imagery's meaning and significance, based on their iconographic and architectural contexts in Khmer temples. The colocation of the *navadevas* and related iconographic themes including Viṣṇu Anantaśayana, the *grahas* as seven *ṛṣis*, and the *mātrkāś*, clarifies that the imagery's meaning relates to the celestial bodies, the directions and the notion of cosmological order. The panel was used both as a lintel above a temple doorway and installed inside the sanctum as an independent object near the image of the main deity, and appears to have been especially associated with shrines located in the southeast of a temple complex. The significance of the panel is suggested to relate to the idea of the temple as cosmic space.

**Keywords:** Angkorian, celestial bodies, cosmological order, *dikpālas*, directions, iconography, *mātrkāś*, *navagrahas*, *navadevas*, pre-Angkorian, seven *ṛṣis*, *vāhana*, Viṣṇu Anantaśayana

មូលនិយមសង្ខេប ៖ នាសម័យបុរាណ ផ្ទាំងចម្លាក់ ឬផ្តែរដែលធ្លាក់ជារូបទេពប្រាំបួនអង្គត្រូវបានគេប្រទះឃើញមានចំនួនសន្លឹកសន្លាប់ និងមានទម្រង់ផ្សេងៗគ្នា។ ផ្ទាំងចម្លាក់ដែលចាស់ជាងគេមានកាលបរិច្ឆេទក្នុងសម័យមុនអង្គរ ដែលភាគច្រើនគេស្គាល់ថាជានព្វគ្រោះ (ផ្កាយប្រាំបួន) ធ្លាក់ក្នុងកាយវិការឈរ។ ក្នុងសម័យអង្គរ កាយវិការរបស់ទេពទាំងប្រាំបួននេះមានការផ្លាស់ប្តូរជាច្រើនទម្រង់ និងមានយន្តជំនិះ។ តាមរយៈការវិភាគសិក្សាឡើងវិញដោយផ្ដោតលើទេវកថានៃទេពនីមួយៗ និងការវិវត្តន៍ទម្រង់សិល្បៈរបស់ផ្ទាំងចម្លាក់ទាំងនេះ យើងអាចសន្និដ្ឋានថា ក្រុមទេពទាំងប្រាំបួនអង្គនៅសម័យអង្គរគឺជា នព្វទេពដែលសំដៅលើការបញ្ចូលគ្នារវាងផ្កាយចំនួនបួនអង្គ និងលោកបាលចំនួនប្រាំអង្គ (ទេពថែរក្សាទិស)។ ការសិក្សានេះក៏ផ្ដោតលើអត្ថន័យ និងតួនាទីសំខាន់ក្នុងការប្រើប្រាស់ផ្ទាំងចម្លាក់នព្វទេពក្នុងស្ថាបត្យកម្មប្រាសាទខ្មែរ ដោយវិភាគលើទេវកថា និងទីតាំងរបស់ចម្លាក់។ នព្វទេពមានទំនាក់ទំនងជាមួយខ្សែរឿងទេវកថាផ្សេងៗដូចជា៖ ព្រះវិស្ណុផ្ទុំ ផ្កាយក្នុងទម្រង់ជាតីសីប្រាំពីរអង្គ និងទេពស្រីដែលជាបរិបទគំនិតស្តីអំពីឋានសួគ៌ ទិស និងលោកធាតុ។ ផ្ទាំងចម្លាក់នព្វទេពត្រូវបានគេប្រើធ្វើជាផ្តែរសម្រាប់ច្រកចេញចូល និងតម្កល់ជាប់តែងឯង

ក្នុងតួប៉មបិតនៅក្បែររូបទេពសំខាន់នៃប្រាសាទ ជាពិសេសទាក់ទងនឹងតួប៉មនៅជ្រុងអាគ្នេយ៍នៃក្រុមប្រាសាទ។ ភាពសំខាន់របស់ផ្ទាំងចម្លាក់នេះត្រូវបានប្រើក្នុងន័យបញ្ជាក់គំនិតដែលសម្គាល់ប្រាសាទជាទីតាំងនៃលោកធាតុ។

ពាក្យគន្លឹះ ៖ សម័យអង្គរ, ឋានសួគ៌, លោកធាតុ, លោកបាល, ទិស, ទេវកថា, ទេពស្រី, នព្វគ្រោះ, នព្វទេព, សម័យមុនអង្គរ, ឥសីប្រាំពីរអង្គ, យាន្តជំនិះ, ព្រះវិស្ណុផ្ទុំ

## Introduction

Stone panels bearing images of nine deities are known in several forms from ancient Cambodia. They are often termed *navagrahas* panels, referring to the nine celestial bodies. However, studies by scholars working in the 1950s and 1960s, including Kamaleswar Bhattacharya,<sup>1</sup> Louis Malleret<sup>2</sup> and Debala Mitra,<sup>3</sup> proposed two different theories regarding the identification of the figures. Bhattacharya and Malleret suggested that they represent a combination of celestial bodies (*grahas*) and guardians of the directions (*dikpālas*),<sup>4</sup> while Mitra, conversely, suggested that they should be interpreted as representing only the *navagrahas*, as seen on panels from ancient India.<sup>5</sup> Scholars therefore disagree on the identification of individual deities in these ensembles and consequently the interpretation of the panels, which has led to the use of different terminology. Whether these deities represent *grahas* or *dikpālas* therefore remains unresolved.

We can begin by reviewing the differences between the *navagrahas* and *dikpālas* in ancient India. The *navagrahas* are nine celestial bodies commonly depicted together in a group, namely Sūrya (Sun), Candra or Soma (Moon), Maṅgala or Aṅgāraka (Mars), Budha (Mercury), Bṛhaspati or Guru (Jupiter), Śukra (Venus), Śani or Śanaīścara (Saturn), Rāhu and Ketu.<sup>6</sup> The *dikpālas*, on the other hand, guarded specific directions and most commonly numbered eight

or ten, namely Indra, Agni, Yama, Nairṛta, Varuṇa, Vāyu, Kubera or Soma, Īśāna, Brahmā, and Ananta.<sup>7</sup>

Both the *navagrahas* and *dikpālas* are subsidiary to the main deity and its temple. In Indian art the *navagrahas* appear in two main forms, as a group on a lintel or independent panel, or as small secondary figures on panels dedicated to another deity, such as Viṣṇu Anantaśayana, Gaurī or Revanta.<sup>8</sup> They are often placed over the doorway but sometimes inside the temple, locations related to the ritual protection they afford the temple.<sup>9</sup> Conversely, *dikpālas* usually appear in high relief on the temple structure or stone panels, often the exterior wall associated with their respective direction, but also on the ceiling or other parts of the temple structure, again having an apotropaic function.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, in ancient Khmer culture, the nine deities ensemble occurs as a relief on monolithic stone panels, temple walls and natural rock surfaces, and as independent sculptures on a shared pedestal with nine holes.

Images of the nine deities developed fully in Khmer art during the Angkorian period, carved as a row of figures in high relief, but the earliest known example appears on a stone panel found at the pre-Angkorian site of Sambor Prei Kuk, dating to around the 7th century CE (Figure 1).<sup>11</sup> On this panel, the nine deities are depicted standing and without their *vāhana* (mount, vehicle), with the exception of Rāhu, whereas the numerous Angkorian period representations show them seated on their respective *vāhana* (Figures 2–7). The iconographic contexts are comparable with India, as is the relationship between Viṣṇu Anantaśayana and the nine deities, and the location of the nine deities on the lintel above a doorway.

However, the representation of the individual deities differs on the panels in Cambodia. While the first two figures in the ensemble can usually be identified as Sūrya and Candra, and the last two as Rāhu and Ketu, as in Indian representations, the remaining five between them are not as easy to name. This highlights the question, first raised by Bhattacharya and

Acknowledgements: This article was developed from an MA thesis, submitted to SOAS University of London in September 2017. I would like to thank Prof. Christian Luczanits for his guidance, and Ben Wreyford for his helpful comments.

<sup>1</sup> BHATTACHARYA, K., “Notes d’iconographie khmère I–IV” [Notes on Khmer Iconography I–IV].

<sup>2</sup> MALLERET, “Contribution à l’étude du thème des Neuf Divinités” [Contribution to the Study of the Motif of the Nine Deities].

<sup>3</sup> MITRA, “A Study of Some Graha-Images of India.”

<sup>4</sup> BHATTACHARYA, K., [Notes on Khmer Iconography I–IV], 191–93; MALLERET, [Contribution to the Study of the Motif of the Nine Deities], 228. Both scholars presented their identifications of deities on several panels in tables in their articles.

<sup>5</sup> MITRA, “A Study of Some Graha-Images of India,” 27–30.

<sup>6</sup> This list follows MEVISSSEN, *Ādityas, Grahas, and other Deities of Time and Space on Sūrya Sculptures*, 1 n.4.

<sup>7</sup> WESSELS-MEVISSSEN, *Gods of the Directions in Ancient India*, 1.

<sup>8</sup> HAQUE and GAIL eds., *Sculptures in Bangladesh*, 56–60 & 74–78.

<sup>9</sup> STUTLEY, *The Illustrated Dictionary of Hindu Iconography*, 101.

<sup>10</sup> WESSELS-MEVISSSEN, *Gods of the Directions in Ancient India*, 1.

<sup>11</sup> BHATTACHARYA, K., [Notes on Khmer Iconography XI], 91–94.



Figure 1. *Navagrahas* panel from Sambor Prei Kuk, ca. 7th century. Stone. Kompong Thom Museum, 391. Photograph by Chhum Menghong ([CC BY-NC 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)).

Malleret, of whether it is appropriate for the Cambodian examples to be identified as *navagrahas*, or as *dikpālas*, or if another designation should be used. Notably, it is clear from epigraphic sources that both the *navagrahas* and *dikpālas* were known from the pre-Angkorian period.<sup>12</sup>

This study of the nine deities in ancient Khmer art is structured into three main sections. First, by reviewing the contributions of previous scholars, the identities of the deities and the typology of the ensemble will be reconsidered, because their appearance varies and some uncertainty remains regarding the identification of certain figures. Second, in a new approach for the Khmer material, their iconographic contexts will be considered to understand the development and associations of the nine deities form. Third, related epigraphy and architectural contexts will be discussed, to offer new interpretations of the significance and possible role of nine deities panels in ancient Cambodia.

## Identification and Typology of the Nine Deities

### Identifications of the Individual Deities

Five of the nine deities on panels from Angkorian Cambodia — the first, second, fifth, eighth and

ninth — are in fixed positions.<sup>13</sup> The deity in the first position is seated on a chariot pulled by horses, and therefore identifiable as Sūrya. The second deity can be identified as Candra, sitting on a square seat or pedestal. In eighth position Rāhu rides a cloud, while the ninth figure is identified as Ketu on a lion. In fifth position is Indra riding a one- or three-headed elephant, Airāvata (Figures 2–7).<sup>14</sup> This deity's presence is key for rejecting Mitra's theory that the deities are the *navagrahas*. Her interpretation was based on the *Śilparatnākara*, which refers to the elephant and horse as the *vāhanas* of Brhaspati and Śukra, respectively, but overlooked the frequent representation of Indra riding a three-headed Airāvata in Khmer art and elsewhere.<sup>15</sup> This highlights the importance of comparing to Khmer iconography, rather than considering only the Indian context.

In contrast, the deities occupying the third, fourth, sixth and seventh positions appear to change positions, and are variously mounted on a bird, antelope, goat, horse, bull, buffalo or rhinoceros. Scholars including Bhattacharya and Malleret have previously suggested different identifications of these deities based on their *vāhana*.<sup>16</sup> For instance, a deity riding a *haṃsa* bird appears especially in fourth position,

<sup>12</sup> BHATTACHARYA, K., *Les religions brahmaniques dans l'ancien Cambodge* [Brahmanic Religions in Ancient Cambodia], 138. See also the section 'Epigraphic Evidence Related to the Nine Deities,' below in this article.

<sup>13</sup> These five identifications concur with BHATTACHARYA, K. ([Notes on Khmer Iconography I–IV], 191–93) and MALLERET ([Contribution to the Study of the Motif of the Nine Deities], 228).

<sup>14</sup> See ROVEDA, *Images of the Gods*, 177 & 187, figs. 4.6.38–59, for multiple examples in Angkorian art.

<sup>15</sup> MITRA, "A Study of Some Graha-Images of India," 27–30.

<sup>16</sup> BHATTACHARYA, K., [Notes on Khmer Iconography I–IV], 192; MALLERET, [Contribution to the Study of the Motif of the Nine Deities], 228.





Figure 2. Navadevas panel from Lolei temple, ca. late 9th – mid 10th century. Stone. Bangkok National Museum. Deities from left: Sūrya, Candra, Vāyu, Brahmā (?), Indra, Kubera, Agni, Rāhu and Ketu. Photograph © Bangkok National Museum.



Figure 3. Navadevas panel from Prasat Neang Khmau, ca. 2nd half of 9th century. Stone. National Museum of Cambodia, Phnom Penh, Ka.879. Deities from left: Sūrya, Candra, Yama, Varuṇa, Indra, Kubera, Agni, Rāhu and Ketu. Photograph © National Museum of Cambodia, Phnom Penh.

and both scholars suggested this represents Brahmā or Skanda. However, in the context of Khmer art, a *haṃsa* is also ridden by Varuṇa. Additionally, scholars have identified some of the animals differently, especially the quadrupeds, leading to confusion between bull, buffalo and goat, and consequently problems identifying gods based solely on their *vāhana*. Therefore, by comparing to the iconographic representations of deities elsewhere in Khmer art and looking again at the identity of each animal, they can be identified on the basis of a combination of iconographic attributes and *vāhana*.

### Vāyu

A deity riding a quadruped and holding a small round object is normally found in third position, but the animal's head is damaged or unclear in most examples, hindering identification. Only on the panel from Lolei (Figure 2) can the animal, in third position and carrying a deity with this attribute, be identified — as an antelope. This *vāhana* suggests that the deity is Vāyu, the *dikpāla* usually associated with the north-west.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> WESSELS-MEVISSSEN, *Gods of the Directions in Ancient India*, 103.

### Brahmā and Varuṇa

The deity in fourth position often rides a bird and sometimes holds what looks like a noose (*pāśa*) (Figures 2 & 3). Most of these birds resemble a goose (*haṃsa*), suggesting the god is likely to be Brahmā or Varuṇa, both *dikpālas*. Outside the context of nine deities panels, Varuṇa appears twice with his noose at Banteay Srei, riding on three *haṃsas* and a single *haṃsa*.<sup>18</sup> Conversely, a parrot-like bird found on a panel from the Bayon was suggested by Malleret to probably be the *vāhana* of Agni (Figure 4).<sup>19</sup>

### Kubera

A deity riding a horse and holding a stick or lotus bud commonly occupies the sixth position (Figures 2, 3 & 5). Malleret and Bhattacharya suggested this is the *dikpāla* Kubera, although the deity often rides a ram, elephant, mongoose (in Buddhist context) or an anthropomorphic figure in Indian iconography.<sup>20</sup> The

<sup>18</sup> ROVEDA, *Images of the Gods*, 188–89, figs. 4.6.75 & 4.6.76.

<sup>19</sup> MALLERET, [Contribution to the Study of the Motif of the Nine Deities], 228.

<sup>20</sup> RAO, *Elements of Hindu Iconography*, Vol. 2 Pt. 2, 536–37; WESSELS-MEVISSSEN, *Gods of the Directions in Ancient India*, 103–5.





Figure 4. Navadevas panel from the Bayon, ca. 13th century. Stone. Conservation d'Angkor, Siem Reap. Deities from left: Sūrya, Candra, Agni, Viṣṇu, Indra, Kubera, Yama, Rāhu and Ketu. Photograph © École française d'Extrême-Orient, Fonds Cambodge, ref. EFEO\_CAM19415\_2. The same panel can be seen in EFEO\_CAM02176.



Figure 5. Navadevas panel from Kuk Roka temple, ca. late 12th century. Stone. National Museum of Cambodia, Phnom Penh, Ka.1658. Deities from left: Sūrya, Candra, Yama (?), Brahmā or Varuṇa, Indra, Kubera, Agni, Rāhu and Ketu. Photograph by Chhum Menghong ([CC BY-NC 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)).

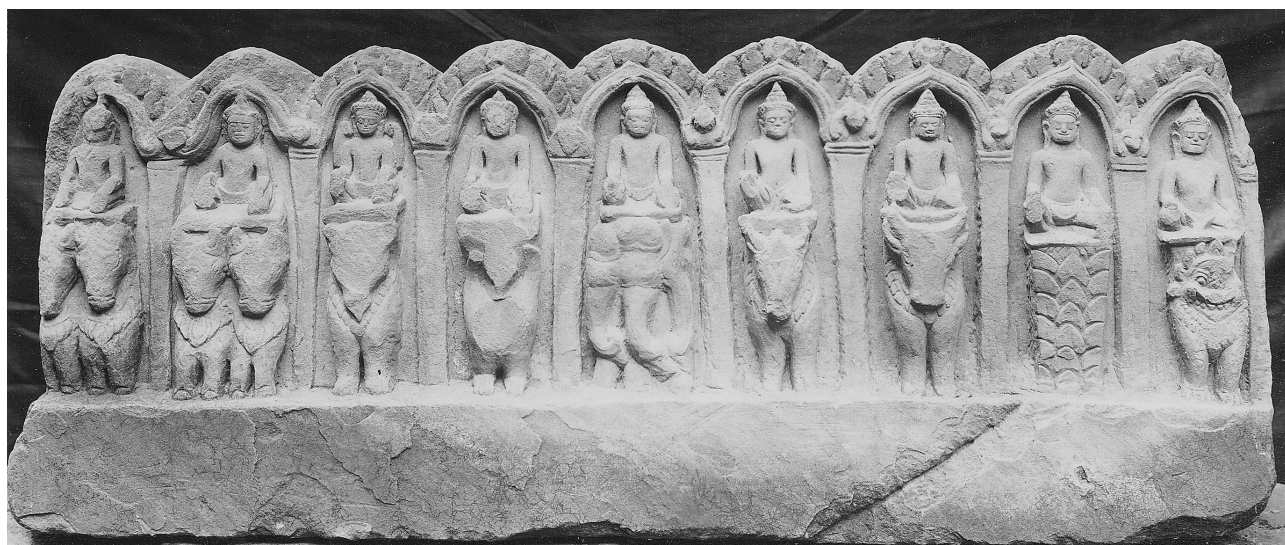


Figure 6. Navadevas panel from Preah Khan temple, ca. late 12th century. Stone. Deities from left: Sūrya, Candra, Viṣṇu, Varuṇa (?), Indra, Kubera, Yama, Rāhu and Ketu. Photograph © École française d'Extrême-Orient, Fonds Cambodge, ref. EFEO\_CAM13834.





Figure 7. *Navadevas* panel from the West Mebon temple, ca. 11th century. Stone. Deities from left: Nairṛta, Viṣṇu, Indra, Yama. Photograph © École française d'Extrême-Orient, Fonds Cambodge, ref. EFEO\_CAM13735.

horse is more common for Vāyu in India, where his *vāhana* may also be an antelope or lion.<sup>21</sup> However, considering contexts beyond nine deities panels, Kubera was also identified by Vittorio Roveda as the deity seated on a horse on the western pediment of the southern library of Angkor Wat's third enclosure.<sup>22</sup> Since Vāyu has already been identified elsewhere in the nine deities group, the deity with the horse *vāhana* is more likely to be Kubera, and indeed they appear together on the Lolei panel (Figure 2).

### Agni

It is likely that both rhinoceros and goat are identifiable as the *vāhana* of Agni in Khmer art. An inscription from the reign of Jayavarman VII specifically refers to Agni on a rhinoceros,<sup>23</sup> and he rides a rhinoceros in reliefs at Angkor Wat and Beng Mealea.<sup>24</sup> Among the representations of nine deities, there is only one example of an animal that could be identified as rhinoceros, namely in the third position on a panel from Prasat Neang Khmau in Takéo province (Figure 3). In Indian art, Agni mostly rides a goat or ram and may hold a spear.<sup>25</sup> In the Angkorian panels, there are several examples where the seventh divinity rides a goat, including the panel from Lolei, where the deity

holds a stick (Figure 2), and the same Prasat Neang Khmau panel where the deity holds a short knife, an attribute of Agni.

The above discussion suggests the nine deities of the Angkorian period are identifiable as a combination of four *grahas* and five *dikpālas*. I therefore accept the term '*navadevas*' used by Bhattacharya and Malleret to refer to the nine deities in Cambodia, which differentiates them from *navagrahas*. Nonetheless, some uncertainties remain with identifications on individual panels, for example that Varuṇa and Brahmā can both have the same *vāhana*, the *haṃsa*. Also, not all animals can be identified with certainty, even having seen several of the panels personally, so the difficulty distinguishing bull from buffalo, for example, makes it impossible to determine if the associated deity represents Īśāna or Yama. The character of each animal and specific iconographic attributes need to be considered.

The important question raised, of course, is why four *grahas* were combined with five *dikpālas*. The combination of *grahas*, *dikpālas* and the three great gods, Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva, was known in ancient Indian art, as can be seen, for example, on a panel from Akhilya in Bengal,<sup>26</sup> but two reasons have been suggested for this combination in Cambodia. Firstly, the *grahas* and *dikpālas* both possess a celestial character, and secondly, some *grahas*, notably Sūrya and Candra, are closely connected with the *dikpālas*. This latter relationship can be seen in a panel from

<sup>21</sup> WESSELS-MEVISSSEN, 102–3.

<sup>22</sup> ROVEDA, *Images of the Gods*, 187–88. The author identifies several other possible examples of Kubera riding a horse.

<sup>23</sup> BHATTACHARYA, K., [Brahmanic Religions in Ancient Cambodia], 142.

<sup>24</sup> ROVEDA, *Images of the Gods*, 174–75, figs. 4.6.01 & 4.6.03.

<sup>25</sup> WESSELS-MEVISSSEN, *Gods of the Directions in Ancient India*, 96–97 & table XV; ELGOOD, *Hinduism and the Religious Arts*, 85.

<sup>26</sup> MEVISSSEN, *Ādityas, Grahas, and other Deities of Time and Space on Sūrya Sculptures*, 20 & pl. 67.





Figure 8. Panel with eight *lokapālas*, Bihar, ca. 9th century. Stone. Patna Museum, Arch 11324. Deities from left: Sūrya, Candra, Vāyu, Varuṇa, Agni, Indra, Yama, Kubera. Photograph © Gerd J. R. Mevissen.

northeastern India showing a distinctive group of eight *dikpālas* consisting of Sūrya, Candra, Vāyu, Varuṇa, Agni, Indra, Yama, and Kubera (Figure 8).<sup>27</sup> Here, Īśāna and Nairṛta have been replaced by Sūrya and Candra, representing a series of *dikpālas* known only from the *Manusmṛti* (ca. 200 BCE – 200 CE). The text says that “a king embodies in his self all the eight *Lokapālas*,” and lists these eight deities.<sup>28</sup> It therefore seems likely that the reason for the combination of *grahas* and *dikpālas* in Khmer context relates to the double role of Sūrya and Candra, which may indicate the significance of the *Manusmṛti* in Angkorian Cambodia.<sup>29</sup>

## Typology of the Nine Deities Ensembles

### Navagrahas in the Pre-Angkorian Period

Until now, the only representation of the nine deities from the pre-Angkorian period was that found at Sambor Prei Kuk (Figure 1),<sup>30</sup> its figures carved in low relief and relatively indistinct. On it, eight deities stand on rounded pedestals, while Rāhu emerges from a cloud. Beginning at the left, the deities in first

and second positions, holding a lotus in each hand, should be identified as Sūrya and Candra, respectively. Those in third, fourth, fifth, sixth and ninth positions each raises their right hand to the shoulder in a similar gesture (*abhayamudrā*?), while the left hand is at the hip. The seventh deity holds a long stick in his right hand, with his left hand at the hip. All wear the plain *sampot* and appear to have their hair in a high chignon. Based on stylistic criteria, Malleret dated this panel to the pre-Angkorian period, ca. 7th century.<sup>31</sup>

Only Sūrya, Candra and Rāhu can therefore be securely identified on this panel. Malleret suggested the seventh figure, holding a long staff, is Kubera.<sup>32</sup> However, Bhattacharya identified the representation of these deities in *abhayamudrā* with a tradition for the *grahas* in the *Agni Purāṇa*, with the seventh god holding the long staff being the planet Śani.<sup>33</sup> The Sambor Prei Kuk panel is therefore likely a representation of the *navagrahas*, similar to the tradition found in the Indian context.

### Navadevas in the Angkorian Period

From the Angkorian period, there are many new versions of nine deities panel. Of the 41 panels identified by Malleret, one dates to the pre-Angkorian period and 38 to the Angkorian period, while two are Cham objects.<sup>34</sup> The Angkorian representations differ from the Sambor Prei Kuk panel discussed above because deities are carved in high relief and posed sitting on their individual *vāhana*. The deities and their *vāhanas* are shown from two different perspectives, in profile and frontally, which are discussed in turn below.

<sup>27</sup> MEVISSSEN, “A Solitary Viṣṇu Sculpture from Bihar,” 129 & fig. 6. See BHATTACHARYA, G., “A Solitary Illustration of Eight Lokapālas from South Bihar,” 63–64 & fig. 1, for another example.

<sup>28</sup> BHATTACHARYA, G., “A Solitary Illustration of Eight Lokapālas from South Bihar,” 67. The author discusses representations of *dikpālas* and *lokapālas*, often understood as equivalent, and the quoted text raises the question of whether the *dikpālas* in the Angkorian *navadevas* should instead be referred to as *lokapālas*, although I have followed previous scholars in using *dikpāla* for the present article.

<sup>29</sup> MEVISSSEN, “Dikpālas and Grahas at Paharpur,” 393, notes a comparable substitution, of Soma for Kubera, referred to in the *Mañjuśrībhāṣita Vāstuvīdyāśāstra*, but this text seems less directly relevant for explaining Angkorian *navadevas* panels because they typically include Kubera riding a horse.

<sup>30</sup> Another pre-Angkorian lintel, in Prei Khmeng style, depicting the nine deities standing, has now been identified in the EFEO Online Photolibrary; see Figure 16 of the present article.

<sup>31</sup> MALLERET, [Contribution to the Study of the Motif of the Nine Deities], 207–8.

<sup>32</sup> MALLERET, 208.

<sup>33</sup> BHATTACHARYA, K., [Notes on Khmer Iconography XI], 92.

<sup>34</sup> MALLERET, [Contribution to the Study of the Motif of the Nine Deities], 228.

Panels carved in profile view include those from Lolei temple (Figure 2), the Ang Khna site in the Koh Ker complex,<sup>35</sup> and Prasat Neang Khmau (Figure 3). According to Malleret, the representations from Lolei and Ang Khna date to either the end of the 9th century or first half of the 10th century,<sup>36</sup> while that from Prasat Neang Khmau dates to the second half of the 9th century based on stylistic features including the deities' hairstyle.

Following the framework outlined earlier in this paper, the deities on the Lolei panel are identifiable as Sūrya, Candra, Vāyu, Brahmā (?), Indra, Kubera, Agni, Rāhu and Ketu. The third deity rides an antelope and holds a small ball, and is likely to be Vāyu. The fourth deity rides a bird, suggesting one of Skanda, Brahmā or Varuṇa, but because the bird's tail is short and not erect like a peacock it should be identified as a goose, the *vāhana* of Brahmā. In addition, it is likely Agni mounted on a goat in the seventh position.

The configuration of the Ang Khna relief differs slightly. The deities in the first, second, eighth and ninth positions are still clearly Sūrya, Candra, Rāhu and Ketu, respectively, but the third deity's *vāhana* is a bird, while that of the fourth is a quadruped. According to Henri Parmentier, the bird is probably a goose and the animal an antelope. He added that the fifth deity rides an elephant, the sixth is on a horse and holds a mace, and the seventh rides a short-tailed animal,<sup>37</sup> possibly a ram. Therefore, the Ang Khna ensemble should probably be identified as Sūrya, Candra, Brahmā, Vāyu, Indra, Kubera, Agni, Rāhu and Ketu.

The Prasat Neang Khmau panel has a similar sequence to the Lolei panel, except that the third deity rides a strange animal that resembles a rhinoceros. In ancient Khmer art, the rhinoceros is often ridden by Agni,<sup>38</sup> but this identification is unlikely because Agni appears in the seventh position on a goat. According to Roveda, the rhinoceros may also be ridden by Yama,<sup>39</sup> and if this idea is accepted, the Prasat Neang Khmau panel would show Sūrya, Candra, Yama, Varuṇa, Indra, Kubera, Agni, Rāhu and Ketu.

Considering next the many panels carved with the deities and their *vāhanas* viewed frontally, one of the most popular groupings is of Sūrya, Candra, Yama (?), Brahmā or Varuṇa, Indra, Kubera, Agni, Rāhu and

Ketu.<sup>40</sup> The third deity is unclear in most examples because the head of the *vāhana* is broken, but all represent a seated deity who holds a ball in his right hand and rides an animal. However, on the panel from Kuk Roka (Figure 5), this animal has two horns, and is probably a bull or buffalo. Since the deity has a fierce appearance and holds a ball in his right hand, he is more likely to be Yama than Śiva. These objects have a similar composition with each deity inside an individual niche, and the panel's lower edge having a border of lotus petals. The inscription on the panel from the Ak Yom temple, dated 1001/1002 CE, provides a reference date for this type of panel.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, a similar panel was produced in the Khleang style, dating to around the end of the 10th century or early 11th century.<sup>42</sup>

One such panel found at the Bayon and dating to approximately the 13th century, bears a distinct pattern of deities (Figure 4). Bhattacharya and Malleret both suggested they are Sūrya, Candra, Agni, Viṣṇu, Indra, Kubera, Yama, Rāhu and Ketu.<sup>43</sup> All hold a staff in their right hand. The third deity rides a bird that resembles a parrot, which is usually a *vāhana* of Agni. The fourth is on a bird with a beak like a *garuḍa*, the *vāhana* of Viṣṇu. The seventh deity riding a buffalo is identifiable as Yama.

The panel from Preah Khan (Figure 6) also differs to the others, because the god in third position possesses four arms, indicating it is Viṣṇu or Brahmā. In the fifth position is Indra, here seated on a three-headed elephant. The combination of four-armed Viṣṇu with Indra on a three-headed elephant in a nine deities composition is also found on the fragmentary panel from the West Mebon (Figure 7). Viṣṇu is positioned fourth on the West Mebon panel but third on the Preah Khan panel, the third position being commonly occupied by Agni. Notably, Brahmā replaced Agni in some Indian compositions, for example in a ceiling relief in Bādāmi Cave 3.<sup>44</sup> The sequence of deities on the Preah Khan panel is therefore Sūrya, Candra, Viṣṇu, Varuṇa (?), Indra, Kubera, Yama, Rāhu and Ketu.

<sup>40</sup> See especially MALLERET, [Contribution to the Study of the Motif of the Nine Deities], 208–23 & 228.

<sup>41</sup> COEDÈS, *Inscriptions du Cambodge* [Inscriptions of Cambodia], vol.5, 59, gives the date as 923 śaka, equating to 1001/1002 CE. See also the section below on epigraphic evidence. A photograph of the Ak Yom panel can be seen in the EFEO Online Photolibrary, with reference EFEO\_CAM08587.

<sup>42</sup> BAPTISTE, "Les neuf 'saisisseurs' (*navagraha*)" [The Nine 'Planets' (*Navagraha*)], 189.

<sup>43</sup> BHATTACHARYA, K., [Notes on Khmer Iconography I–IV], 191–92; MALLERET, [Contribution to the Study of the Motif of the Nine Deities], 220–21 & 228.

<sup>44</sup> BHATTACHARYA, K., [Notes on Khmer Iconography V–VII], 218 n.5; WESSELS-MEVISSSEN, "Some Early Sets of *Dikpālas* (Guardians of the Directions) at Bādāmi," 734–35.

<sup>35</sup> See PARMENTIER, *L'art khmèr Classique* [Classic Khmer Art], vol.1, 77 & photo XXX A.

<sup>36</sup> MALLERET, [Contribution to the Study of the Motif of the Nine Deities], 211 & 214–15.

<sup>37</sup> PARMENTIER, [Classic Khmer Art], vol.1, 77.

<sup>38</sup> ROVEDA, *Images of the Gods*, 174.

<sup>39</sup> ROVEDA, 396.





Figure 9. *Navadevas* panel from Ba Kan temple, ca. late 10th century. Stone. Present location unknown. The block is carved on two sides. Left: *Navadevas* on the likely front. Right: Viṣṇu Anantaśayana and Viṣṇu Trivikrama on the likely back. Photographs by Robert Dalet reproduced from BÉNISTE, [Notes on Khmer Iconography XI], figs. 3 & 4, with the permission of the École française d'Extrême-Orient.

The preceding discussion of the typology of the nine deities ensemble shows that the idea of combining *grahas* and *dikpālas*, into a group referred to here as the *navadevas*, appears to have originated in the early Angkorian period. The panel exists in two forms, with the deities and *vāhanas* carved in profile or frontal view. Of the *dikpālas*, Indra and Kubera were fixed in fifth and sixth positions. Varuṇa commonly occupied the fourth position, although he was sometimes replaced by Brahmā, and the remaining third and seventh deities were variously Agni, Vāyu, Viṣṇu and Yama.

## The Nine Deities in Context

An analysis of Khmer representations of the nine deities suggests they were conceptually related to other iconographic forms, including Viṣṇu Anantaśayana, the seven *ṛṣis* and the *mātrkāś*, as discussed below. These three iconographic compositions show similar conceptions to Indian forms, and comparable relationships with the nine deities.

### The Nine Deities with Viṣṇu Anantaśayana

The *navagrahas* may appear as subsidiary figures with Viṣṇu Anantaśayana from the 7th century onward in India. A lintel dating to the 7th–8th century in the Mathura Museum, for example, features the nine celestial bodies in a row above the reclining Viṣṇu.<sup>45</sup> Examples are also found in Cambodia that combine celestial bodies with Viṣṇu Anantaśayana, including the relief at Angkor Wat and panel from Ba Kan temple discussed next.

### The Sequence of Deities in the Relief at Angkor Wat

A scene of Viṣṇu lying on the Sea of Milk appears in the northwest corner pavilion of Angkor Wat's third

gallery, on the north wall of the east wing. Beneath the reclining Viṣṇu is a sequence of eight deities, with images of Sūrya and Candra below them.<sup>46</sup> Apparently leading the procession of eight deities is Ketu on a lion, followed by, in sequence, Agni on a goat, Yama on a buffalo, Indra on an elephant and holding his *vajra*, Kubera on a horse, multi-armed Skanda on a peacock, Varuṇa on a *haṃsa* and holding his noose, and Nairṛta on a *yakṣa*. With Sūrya and Candra, this represents a new sequence with ten members.

According to Eleanor Mannikka, this procession of deities should be interpreted as the *devas* requesting that Viṣṇu incarnates as Rāma to kill the demon Rāvaṇa, because the scene is located transitionally between two large panels showing the Battle of 21 *Devas* and the Battle of Laṅkā.<sup>47</sup> François Martini suggested instead that the procession seems to relate to a scene of the *svayaṃvara* of Sītā, located in the same corner pavilion on the east wall of the south wing. He noted that the Khmer *Rāmāyaṇa* (*Rāmakerti I*) also mentions a procession of gods who attended the *svayaṃvara* of Sītā, given as Indra mounted on his elephant Airāvata, Agni on a rhinoceros, Vāyu riding a horse, Varuṇa on a *nāga*, Candra (or Skanda) on a peacock, Brahmā on a *haṃsa*, Nairṛta on a *yakṣa*, Vaiśravaṇa (or Kubera) on a *vimāna* (flying palace) and Īśvara on a bull.<sup>48</sup>

It is clear that the group of deities at Angkor Wat is distinct from the nine deities compositions on the panels discussed in the previous section. Rāhu is absent and Nairṛta is new, in the same way the Khmer *Rāmāyaṇa* includes Nairṛta but not Rāhu. However, comparison with the nine deities panel from the West Mebon (Figure 7) is of particular interest because, unusually, Nairṛta also appears here. If it is assumed that the Angkor Wat group starts with Sūrya and Candra, as in nine deities panels, Nairṛta then occupies the third position, as he does on

<sup>45</sup> DESAI, *Iconography of Viṣṇu*, 28 & fig. 24. See also the online photographic archive of the American Institute of Indian Studies, Center for Art and Archaeology, Accession no. 5682 (Negative no. 19.49).

<sup>46</sup> MANNIKKA, *Angkor Wat*, 186–89 & figs. 6.10–6.14.

<sup>47</sup> MANNIKKA, 178–79.

<sup>48</sup> MARTINI, "En marge du *Rāmāyaṇa* cambodgien" [With Reference to the Cambodian *Rāmāyaṇa*], 85–90.



Figure 10. *Navadevas* panel from the East Mebon temple, ca. 10th century. Stone. The block is carved on two sides. Above: *Navadevas* on the likely front. Below: The seven *ṛṣis* on the likely back. Photographs © École française d'Extrême-Orient, Fonds Cambodge, ref. EFEO\_CAM19416\_3 & EFEO\_CAM19417\_1.

the West Mebon panel. In addition, Yama appears to the right of Indra in both contexts. The positions of Nairṛta, Indra and Yama in the Angkor Wat relief are therefore comparable to the West Mebon panel, reinforcing a relationship with the nine deities ensemble.

### The Block from Ba Kan Temple

A stone block found at Ba Kan temple, in Pursat province, is carved on both sides, as a nine deities panel on one side and with Vaiṣṇava imagery on the other (Figure 9). The main relief of the *navadevas* on the likely front of the block is similar to other panels dating to the late 10th century, with deities viewed frontally. The likely reverse connects two iconographic themes of Viṣṇu Anantaśayana and Trivikrama, separated by an image of Garuḍa, well known as the *vāhana* of Viṣṇu, holding the tails of two *nāgas*. One *nāga* is Ananta, the cosmic ocean and symbol of the nadir, while Viṣṇu steps on the other *nāga* in an unusual extension of the Trivikrama iconography. Mireille Bénisti suggested that this association of themes indicated the notion of cosmological order was significant to the group's inter-

pretation.<sup>49</sup> Overall, all three iconographic components of the Ba Kan block relate to conceptions of the cosmos: the nine deities, Viṣṇu Anantaśayana and Viṣṇu Trivikrama.

For Mireille Bénisti, the Ba Kan block also indicates an association between the *navagrahas* and the cult of Viṣṇu similar to representations in India.<sup>50</sup> The iconographic role of the *navagrahas* as subsidiary images with Viṣṇu Anantaśayana was already noted above, but the present paper identifies the deities as *navadevas* rather than *navagrahas*. Bénisti's stylistic analysis suggested that the reliefs on both sides should be dated to the last decades of 10th century,<sup>51</sup> which establishes a strong connection between the *navadevas* and Viṣṇu Anantaśayana reliefs, and assimilates the connection between the *navagrahas* and Viṣṇu Anantaśayana in ancient India.

### The *Navadevas* and the Seven *Ṛṣis*

A panel found at the East Mebon temple also has reliefs on both sides, the front depicting the nine

<sup>49</sup> BÉNISTI, "Notes d'iconographie khmère XI" [Notes on Khmer Iconography XI], 387.

<sup>50</sup> BÉNISTI, 387.

<sup>51</sup> BÉNISTI, 385.





Figure 11. Rubbing of images carved on the sides of a *liṅga* from Preah Pithu temple, ca. late 10th century. Stone. National Museum of Cambodia, Phnom Penh, Ka.1687. Photograph © National Museum of Cambodia, Phnom Penh.

deities and the reverse showing seven *ṛṣis* (Figure 10). Ascetics occasionally occur in Khmer art as a row of subsidiary figures along the upper edge on a lintel, but normally in a group of nine or eleven. A group of seven is rare in Khmer iconography and found as an independent subject only on a stone panel from the Pre Rup temple complex.<sup>52</sup> This was installed inside the southeast tower of the complex, which is also a frequent location for the nine deities panel. This suggests a connection between the nine deities and seven *ṛṣis*, which is notable because the seven *ṛṣis*, or *saptarṣi*, are the seven star-gods of the week.

Further material for understanding the seven *ṛṣis* in Khmer context is provided by the *liṅga* from Preah Pithu temple (Figure 11). Carved in the Baphuon style dating to the late 10th century, the *liṅga* has reliefs of four gods related to the cosmic divine, as documented in the archive of National Museum of Cambodia, Phnom Penh. The *liṅga*'s upper part has four sides showing Viṣṇu on Garuḍa, four-faced Brahmā on a *haṃsa*, Śiva and Umā on Nandin, and a male deity sitting on a lotus. The ornate lower part has eight sides on which appear the seven *ṛṣis*, with a female figure who is located directly beneath the male deity on a lotus and directed towards them. The inscriptions below the figures identify the male deity as *vraḥ vaiśrava*, a god of wealth sometimes identified with Kubera, and the female figure as *vraḥ dharanī*, a name of the earth goddess. An associ-

ation between Kubera and the earth goddess is found in the *Harivaṃśa*, where Kubera is described as lord of the *gandharvas*, and the *gandharvas* and *apsarases* both possess the "scent" of the earth mother. This continued the Vedic tradition that the *gandharvas* and *apsarases* received *punyagandha* as their milk from the earth.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, the *Harivaṃśa* also relates that the seven *ṛṣis* represent the stars and continued the Vedic tradition of their directional associations. The *R̥gveda* preserves an earlier tradition of the names of the seven *ṛṣis* in each direction: "(In the North): Vasiṣṭha, Kaśyapa, Atri, Viśvāmitra, Gautama, Jamadagni, Bharadvāja; (East): Kauśika, Yavakrīta, Gārgya, Gālava, Kaṇva, son of Medhātithi; (South): Svastyātreya, Namuci, Pramuci, Agastya, Atri, Sumukha, Vimukha; (West): Nṛṣadgu (-ḍgu), Kavaṣa (-ṣin), Dhaumya, Raudreya (mahān ṛṣiḥ) or Kauṣeya."<sup>54</sup>

As noted above, *ṛṣis* sometimes appear as a row of subsidiary figures along the upper edges of lintels. Interestingly, the seven *ṛṣis* are also found in relation to Viṣṇu Anantaśayana, as on a Khleang style lintel at the National Museum, Phnom Penh (Figure 12). The main image shows Viṣṇu reclining while the seven *ṛṣis* form a row above. This compares with Indian art, where representations of the *navagrahas* may appear in the upper part of a Viṣṇu Anantaśayana lintel, as noted above.

<sup>52</sup> A photograph of the Pre Rup panel can be seen in the EFEO Online Photolibrary, with reference EFEO\_CAM12979.

<sup>53</sup> HOPKINS, *Epic Mythology*, 142–52.

<sup>54</sup> HOPKINS, 177.



Figure 12. Khleang style lintel showing Viṣṇu Anantaśayana, provenance unknown, ca. early 11th century. Stone. National Museum of Cambodia, Phnom Penh, Ka.3216. The seven ṛṣis appear along the upper border. Photograph by Chhum Menghong (CC BY-NC 4.0).

The theme of the seven ṛṣis was therefore connected with both the *navadevas* and Viṣṇu Anantaśayana in ancient Cambodia, and there appears to be a parallel between the seven ṛṣis and nine deities in their roles as celestial bodies and gods of the directions. This interrelationship was already established in Indian art with images of Viṣṇu Anantaśayana below the *navagrahas*.

### The Navadevas and the Mātṛkās

An association between the *navadevas* and *mātṛkās*, the mother goddesses, is rare in ancient Khmer contexts but found at the Ang Khna site, discussed earlier. On different sides of the same natural rock are carved the *navadevas*, eight *mātṛkās*, and a row of gods including Indra, Śiva, Viṣṇu, Brahmā and four unidentified deities, one of whom is on a bird.<sup>55</sup> The colocation of the *navagrahas* with the three great gods and *dikpālas* is known in ancient Indian art, on the panel from Akhilya, Bengal,<sup>56</sup> but why the *mātṛkās* might be associated with the *grahas* or *dikpālas* in ancient Cambodia is unclear. Another nine deities panel found at Wat Prei Phdao, near Siem Reap, shows a row of 18 women seated beneath them (Figure 13) but in this case, it is unclear whether they represent *mātṛkās*. The possibility of a relationship between the *navadevas* and these female figures needs to be considered.

Two observations may provide further insights. Firstly, Indra is always in the fifth, that is central, position on *navadevas* panels. Secondly, at Cambodian Buddhist pagodas, the nine deities are positioned in the eight directions on boundary or '*sima*' stones, usually

accompanied by an image of the earth goddess.<sup>57</sup> At the centre of the pagoda building is another such stone called the *indrakil*, a name that relates it to Indra. Notably, the Preah Pithu *liṅga* (Figure 11) also shows the earth goddess was connected with celestial and directional deities. It therefore seems likely there was a connection, as yet uncharacterised, between the nine deities, with Indra at the centre of the *navadevas* panel and the Buddhist pagoda, and goddesses in ancient Cambodia.

### The Significance of the Nine Deities Panel

In ancient India, the representation of the celestial bodies had three main functions, protecting the temple entrance as an image on the lintel, as cult icon, and as subsidiary deities to the main deity in an iconographic composition.<sup>58</sup> The role of the nine deities in ancient Cambodia can be interpreted from epigraphic sources and the architectural locations of their representations.

### Epigraphic Sources on the Nine Deities

Three Khmer inscriptions are particularly significant for understanding how the nine deities panels were used. Inscription K.752, on a *navadevas* panel found at Ak Yom temple, mentions a person with the status of *steñ añ* offering the panel to the god Śrī Gambhīreśvara in 1001/1002 CE.<sup>59</sup> K.593, from Preah Phnom temple and dated 930 CE, mentions the

<sup>55</sup> PARMENTIER, [Classic Khmer Art], vol.1, 77 & photo XXX B.

<sup>56</sup> MEVISSSEN, *Ādityas, Grahas, and other Deities of Time and Space on Sūrya Sculptures*, 20 & pl. 67.

<sup>57</sup> See GUTHRIE, "History and Cult of the Buddhist Earth Deity in Mainland Southeast Asia," vol. 2, 33, fig. 4.9 for a photograph.

<sup>58</sup> MARKEL, *Origins of the Indian Planetary Deities*, 15–16.

<sup>59</sup> COEDÈS, [Inscriptions of Cambodia], vol. 5, 59, gives the date as 923 śaka.





Figure 13. *Navadevas* panel from Wat Prei Phdao, near Siem Reap. Stone. A row of 18 women appear along the lower border. Photograph © Ang Chouléan.

images of the planets being installed with images of Caṇḍī (Umā), Īśvara (Śiva), Vighnapati (Gaṇeśa), and the *liṅga*.<sup>60</sup> In addition, it is clear from K.726 (face A), from Tang Krang and dating to the 7th or early 8th century, that a group of nine planets similar to ancient India was already known at this date. The text names them at the beginning of the text as Ravi, Śaśi, Bhauma, Vudha [Budha], Guru, Śukra, Śanaīś-cara, Rāhu and Ketu.<sup>61</sup>

Epigraphic sources therefore provide evidence that the *navagrahas* were established in ancient Khmer ritual contexts at least as early as the 8th century, and that they were installed as subsidiary deities to a main deity. It is likely they were installed together with the main god inside its sanctum, as indicated for the Ak Yom panel.

### Location of the Nine Deities Panels in Khmer Temple Complexes

Most of the ancient Khmer panels were not found *in situ*, making it difficult to determine their function. However, several panels are recorded as having been found in the southeast shrine of the temple complex, including those from Ak Yom, Preah Ko, the West Mebon and Pre Rup. Indeed, the earliest known example of the nine deities panel was installed in a southeast shrine, being found in tower N10 of the North group at Sambor Prei Kuk, dating to the 7th century. Here, a pedestal with nine holes was installed on a separate small brick terrace for these subsidiary deities, to the right of a sandstone pedestal for the image of the tower's primary deity, Harihara (Figure 14).<sup>62</sup> A similar location is seen with

Angkor Wat, where the ten deities ensemble discussed earlier is located in the northwest corner of the third gallery. The northwest location may appear to differ to other temples, but this is because Angkor Wat, unusually, faces west. Had Angkor Wat been constructed facing east, the deities would be located in the same southeast direction.

The above examples suggest the southeast direction was of primary importance for locating the nine deities. In a temple complex with multiple shrines, the southeast shrine was the most common location for installing their images, and this seems to have been the tradition since at least the 7th century. The Angkor Wat example highlights that two themes representing the first stage of a narrative occur together in the northwest corner pavilion, being Viṣṇu Anantaśayana with the ten deities at the creation of the cosmos, and the *svayamvara* of Sītā as the first episode of the *Rāmāyaṇa* culminating in the Battle of Laṅkā. This correspondence suggests the southeast shrine of a temple complex was particularly related to the concept of cosmological creation, or was the starting point for narratives or events relating to the temple. Indeed, because most Khmer temples faced east, entering the temple complex and performing *pradakṣiṇa* or clockwise circumambulation of the main tower, means that the southeast corner is the first passed. This significance of the southeast direction, that of the fire god Agni, may help to explain why images of the *navadevas* were installed in the southeast shrine.

another example found at Ta Keo temple in Angkor Thom, which was probably used for the *navadevas*. A photograph of the Ta Keo pedestal can be seen in the EFEO Online Photolibrary, with reference EFEO\_CAM19725\_3. Personal observation of the brick structure supporting the pedestal at N10 shows it was constructed at the same time as the brick tower itself, because the inner face of the tower wall forms a step over the top of the structure supporting the pedestal. The tower itself dates from the 7th century, based on stylistic analysis of sculptural features on its exterior.

<sup>60</sup> COEDÈS, vol. 3, 119–20.

<sup>61</sup> COEDÈS, vol. 5, 75–77. Ravi and Śaśi refer to the Sun and Moon.

<sup>62</sup> The subsidiary pedestal in N10 is damaged, with only six holes remaining. Its original form, with nine holes for installing nine separate sculptures, can be reconstructed through comparison with





Figure 14. Pedestal with 9 holes, installed on a brick terrace next to the image of Harihara, in tower N10, North group, Sambor Prei Kuk, ca. 7th century. Stone. The different views show the pedestal's relationship with the brick terrace, the brick wall of the tower, and a replica of the image of Harihara on its own pedestal. Photographs by Chhum Menghong (CC BY-NC 4.0).

There are also cases where the panel was installed above the temple doorway as a lintel. One was preserved in its original location at Neak Ta Kong Srok temple in Siem Reap province (Figure 15),<sup>63</sup> while another lintel in Prei Khmeng style (640–645 CE to the end of 7th century), known from a photograph in the EFEO archive, depicts the nine deities under the arch (Figure 16). These compare to Indian examples with the *navagrahas* installed over the doorway, such as at the western entrance of the Bhāskareśvara temple in Bhubaneśvar.<sup>64</sup>

## Conclusion

Images of the nine deities existed in Khmer iconography since the 7th century and became popular during the Angkorian period. The earliest known

example was found at Sambor Prei Kuk with the nine celestial bodies, the *navagrahas*, represented with a standing posture. The veneration of the *navagrahas* is also indicated in inscription K.726, dating from the late 7th or early 8th century.<sup>65</sup> As Khmer artistic forms continued to develop in the Angkorian period, nine deities panels of an entirely different character appeared, with deities seated on their individual *vāhana*. These differ to the *navagrahas*, combining only four celestial bodies with five directional guardians. This group is better designated as the *navadevas*, 'nine deities'.

The individual deities of the *navadevas* vary. Six deities have fixed positions, being Sūrya (first), Candra (second), Indra (fifth), Kubera (sixth), Rāhu (eighth) and Ketu (ninth). Those in the third, fourth and seventh positions change between Agni, Yama, Vāyu, Varuṇa, Skanda, Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva. The reason for this fluidity in the membership of the group is unclear, but instances of combining *grahas* with *dikpālas* and the three great gods are also known from ancient India. The combination of *grahas* and *dikpālas* in ancient Cambodia may be related to the

<sup>63</sup> The EFEO Online Photolibrary (reference EFEO\_CAM12645) records this temple with inventory number IK 675. The structure has collapsed, with only the entrance structure and another fragment of lintel remaining. The panel appears to be in Pre Rup style (mid-10th century).

<sup>64</sup> BÉNISTI, [Notes on Khmer Iconography XI], 379 & fig. 5, pl. XXXIX.

<sup>65</sup> COEDÈS, [Inscriptions of Cambodia], vol. 5, 75–77.





Figure 15. *Navadevas* on a lintel at Neak Ta Kong Srok temple, ca. mid-10th century. Stone. Photograph © École française d'Extrême-Orient, Fonds Cambodge, ref. EFEO\_CAM12645.



Figure 16. *Navagrahas* on a pre-Angkorian lintel, provenance unknown, ca. 2nd half of 7th century. Stone. Present location unknown. Photograph © École française d'Extrême-Orient, Fonds Cambodge, ref. EFEO\_CAM01594\_2.



*Manusmṛti* text, in which Sūrya and Candra possess the role of directional deities, replacing Īśāna and Nairṛta, respectively. It seems, therefore, that the Khmer *navadevas* had a double role as *grahas* and *dikpālas*.

This conclusion is further supported through the relationship of the *navadevas* iconographic theme with those of Viṣṇu Anantaśayana and the seven *ṛṣis*. The nine deities were found with Viṣṇu Anantaśayana in the northwest corner pavilion of Angkor Wat's third gallery and on a panel from Ba Kan temple, and their analysis suggests the significance of the notion of cosmological order.<sup>66</sup> Similarly, the *navagrahas* are found with Viṣṇu Anantaśayana in Indian art. Moreover, the seven *ṛṣis* are represented along the upper edge of a 10th-century Viṣṇu Anantaśayana lintel in the National Museum, Phnom Penh, but are also associated with the *navadevas*, as on the West Mebon panel. The seven *ṛṣis* protect the directions in the *Harivaṃśa*, while the *liṅga* from Preah Pithu temple suggests a directional association in ancient Cambodia, especially involving Kubera, and provides an epigraphic identification as the seven *grahas* of the week. It therefore seems clear that the seven *ṛṣis* and *navadevas* combine the roles of *grahas* and *dikpālas* in ancient Khmer context.

Images of the *navadevas* were used in two distinct ways. Firstly, they were installed inside a temple sanctum near the main deity, usually the southeast shrine of a temple complex. The earliest evidence for this is found in the N10 tower of Sambor Prei Kuk, but the significance of the southeast shrine for the *navadevas* becomes especially apparent during the Angkorian period, with examples at Ak Yom and Angkor Wat. Secondly, the *navadevas* panel was sometimes installed above the temple doorway, which was also the case for the *navagrahas* in India. These locations for installing the *navadevas* may have been intended to convey the idea of the sanctum as representing cosmic space.

However, questions still remain concerning the ancient Khmer *navadevas* iconography, most notably the reason for the variation in the deities included in the group, and how their images functioned in the wider temple complex. An important connection has been made in this paper with the directional distribution of nine *sima* stones at later Buddhist pagodas in Cambodia, with the fixing of Indra and the *indrakīl* at the centre of the *navadevas* and pagoda, respectively. Indeed, other *sima* sometimes bear images of Viṣṇu and *ṛṣis*, both noted to have directional associations. The relationship between *navadevas* and *sima* stones suggests an additional direction for further research to better understand the *navadevas* in ancient Cambodia.

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<sup>66</sup> BÉNISTI, [Notes on Khmer Iconography XI], 387.



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## About *Pratu*

*Pratu: Journal of Buddhist and Hindu Art, Architecture and Archaeology of Ancient to Premodern Southeast Asia* is funded by the Alphawood Foundation, under the auspices of the Southeast Asian Art Academic Programme (SAAAP). The journal is managed and edited by a group of research students in the Department of History of Art and Archaeology at SOAS University of London, in collaboration with an advisory group formed of members of SAAAP's Research & Publications Committee.

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## Acknowledgement

Our sincere thanks to the anonymous scholars providing peer review of *Pratu* articles.